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CULTURES OF THE EDGE?
THE PLACE OF THE COAST IN MARITIME
HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF BRITAIN

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PHILIP PAYTON, ALSTON KENNERLEY, and HELEN DOE (eds.), *The Maritime History of Cornwall* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2014), xviii + 461 pp. ISBN 978 0 85989 850 8. £65.00 US $110.00 (hardback)

The study of maritime history has become increasingly popular in recent years. This interest has been fed by environmental views of the state of the oceans, both past and future, as much as by the implicit or explicit claim that a study of the sea is an indispensable part of global and world history.[1] At the same time, the repercussions of maritime aspects for specific social groups in domestic settings, regardless of whether they are local, regional, or national in scale, continue to be studied. Curiously, however, the transnational search for the cultural, economic, and political impact of the oceans also seems to have sparked a new interest in maritime themes 'at home', generating new approaches. This is particularly striking in the British case. Here the idea and awareness of an island situation and the imperial setting of colonial rule, both with seafaring implications, have traditionally provided starting points for maritime research. Unsurprisingly, therefore, questions of national or imperial identity have recently attracted fresh attention in relation to maritime matters. Somewhat less straightforward, at least at first glance, is the noticeable trend towards engaging with littoral and coastal themes. Both, however, have been stimulated by the global dimensions of maritime research, and are also intricately connected to each other in interesting and perhaps productive ways. This brief article will illustrate these points by surveying recent examples of maritime research on Britain from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

It has recently been noted that 'coasts are still an unmarked category in both history and geography'.[2] Based on this observation, calls have been made for a 'New Coastal History'.[3] Obviously, claims such as this beg the question of to what extent the coast can be seen as something distinct enough to allow for specialized historical research,

[1] Maria Fusaro and Amélia Polónia (eds.), *Maritime History as Global History* (Liverpool, 2010); Glen O'Hara, ' "The Sea is Swinging into View": Modern British Maritime History in a Globalised World', *English Historical Review*, 124 (2009), 1109–34; Alison Bashford, 'Terraqueous Histories', *Historical Journal*, 60 (2017), 253–72; John Gillis and Franziska Torma (eds.), *Fluid Frontiers: New Currents in Marine Environmental History* (Cambridge, 2015).

[2] John Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago, 2012), 8.

[3] David Worthington (ed.), *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond* (London, 2017). See also Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen (eds.), *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges* (Honolulu, 2007).

both conceptually and practically. The few existing studies that engage with coasts directly offer a variety of answers. John Gillis, in his monograph on the shore in human history, has employed the term 'edge species' to describe societies whose way of life is intricately connected with the water's edge.[4] Michael Pearson, meanwhile, has 'no doubt that there is such a thing as a littoral society'.[5] It is perhaps no coincidence that both scholars have repeatedly looked at islands to identify societies whose identity is palpably marked by littoral influences, and it is here that their ideas tie in with views of a distinctly British island identity. On the scale of the nation, the British case is perhaps exemplary for the study of a maritime or littoral identity. On a somewhat smaller scale, however, recent research on cultural representations of the sea coast in literature and art has also claimed that there is something distinct about the ways in which social groups and individuals engage with the shore. Tricia Cusack, for example, has described the water's edge as 'a marginal territory or borderland that becomes invested with cultural and historical meanings'.[6] Once again, this interpretation of cultural engagement with the coast is seen as informing the identity of these social groups and individuals.

Finally, in many recent contributions there is a sense that the nature and patterns of littoral activity in terms of habitation, occupation, and social structures are what makes the coast distinct. To a certain extent, these are variations on the well-established characteristics of borderlands in general, which recent research sees as mobility and exchange rather than impenetrability.[7] But it is more than that. According to Isaac Land, coasts, the points where land and water meet, are 'messy, intermediate places' that engender meetings and exchange, and are thus more open to external influences than inland

[4] Gillis, *The Human Shore*, passim.
[5] M. N. Pearson, 'Littoral Society: The Case for the Coast', *The Great Circle*, 7 (1985), 1–8, at 7.
[6] Tricia Cusack, 'Introduction: Exploring the Water's Edge', in ead. (ed.), *Art and Identity at the Water's Edge* (Farnham, 2012), 1–20, at 1.
[7] T. M. Wilson and H. Donnan (eds.), *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge, 1998); Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (eds.), *Mobility Makes States: Migration and Power in Africa* (Philadelphia, 2015).

societies.[8] Gérard le Bouëdec, on the other hand, has specifically stressed the 'pluriactivity' of people living on the shore, who make use of both the terrestrial and maritime features of their environment as a matter of course.[9] Aspects such as these, according to Yogesh Sharma, give coasts a 'particular identity and specific regionality'.[10] And for Michael Pearson, 'it is this mixture of maritime and terrestrial influences that makes a study of littoral society a paradigm for maritime history in general'.[11]

In the following pages I will explore these themes of maritime identity, littoral imageries and representations, and coastal activity in relation to recently published scholarship. It should be noted that I am not trying to suggest that coastal history is what these authors intend to do, or, indeed, what they should be doing. Most of the books discussed here have a different agenda. My aim is simply to assess whether these individual strands of maritime research make a case for coastal history, and, if so, to explore what such a coastal history might look like.

I *Maritime Identities*

A recent collection of essays edited by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith puts the coast at the very centre of the narrative.[12] Thirteen case studies in literary criticism draw attention to coastal narratives and perceptions of the Irish and British Atlantic edge from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. In adopting a 'littoral per-

[8] Isaac Land, 'Tidal Waves: The New Coastal History', *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2007), 731–43, at 740.
[9] Gérard Le Bouëdec, 'La pluriactivité dans les sociétés littorales XVIIe–XIXe siècle', *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, 109 (2002), 61–90. See also his earlier monograph, *Activités maritimes et sociétés littorales de l'Europe atlantique, 1690–1790* (Paris, 1997).
[10] Yogesh Sharma, 'Introduction: Facets of Ecology and Society in Coastal India in the Premodern Phase', in id. (ed.), *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Premodern India* (Delhi, 2010), pp. xv–lxi, at p. xv.
[11] M. N. Pearson, 'Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems', *Journal of World History*, 17 (2006), 353–73, at 354.
[12] Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (eds.), *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* (Oxford, 2017).

spective',[13] the collection explores the coast as a rich and dynamic area of exchange, rather than seeing it as 'the dwindling and petering out of an edge'.[14] But the essays also have a larger agenda. For once, they do not put the spotlight on something that is marginal or peripheral. Their aim is permanently to recover the coast from its marginality by disputing the conceptions of space that inform its marginality. The angle from which they do this is the concept of the archipelago. Originally coined to circumvent nationalism's limitations in making sense of the composite nature and web of relationships that structured the British Isles politically during the seventeenth century, the concept has subsequently gained importance in doing away with Anglocentric perspectives on the British Isles in a wider sense.[15] The authors appropriate this archipelagic perspective to question existing 'entrenchments of national identity' and to stress the spatial fluidity of processes of cultural identity. This, in turn, allows them to conceive of coasts as areas of intensified cultural activity, as 'points or moments of cultural exchange and consequent replottings of identity'.[16] Accordingly, their perspective highlights the importance of place without essentializing it, and looks for meaning and identity at the margins and on a local scale.

This cautious replotting of traditional narratives of national identity is, of course, nowhere more relevant than in the British case. In a context where Britain's geographical situation as an island and England's political dominance over other parts of the British Isles have traditionally been overstated to the point where they could be seen as determining the course of British history and the identity of its people, any constructivist reading and questioning of this determinism is especially necessary. This trend is visible in more than one strand of maritime research and new interpretations of British identity are currently being put forward from maritime or coastal perspectives. In a recent edited volume, Duncan Redford has specifically aimed to address questions of identity in relation to the maritime

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[13] Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith, 'Introduction', ibid. 1–18, at 5.
[14] Ibid. 6.
[15] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge, 2005); John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics, 1603–1707* (Oxford, 2008).
[16] Allen, Groom, and Smith, 'Introduction', 5.

dimension.[17] Taking a broad outlook, the essays in this volume most-ly address British identity, but also include helpful comparisons with other nations. The volume, according to Redford's introduction, sets out to explore something hitherto neglected, namely, the connection of identity and maritime history, and it does so with a clear construct-ivist notion of how identity was historically created and shaped. As a whole, the volume thus helpfully complicates traditional under-standings of identity. This process of complication begins by identity being examined at different levels of society. The essays are organ-ized to provide insights into national, regional, corporate, individual, and imperial aspects of identity.

While the first section on national identity is perhaps a little too occupied with navies, it also highlights an important point, namely, that naval issues were often deliberately used to promote a sense of 'Britishness' among the various peoples who formed this nation. James Davey's chapter on the eighteenth-century naval hero is espe-cially instructive in this respect, and the same is true of Redford's analysis of the changing place of the navy in the self-image of the British nation in the later nineteenth century.[18] What is obscured by these historically located grand narratives of national identity, how-ever, becomes clearer in subsequent chapters on regional, individual, and corporate identities. Beyond the empire and the nation, we fre-quently find smaller units adopting bits and pieces of what is offered on a national scale, but also clinging to other elements more immedi-ately relevant to their own social experiences. This is as apparent in Cori Convertito's chapter on tattoos and expressions of individuality in the Victorian navy as in Britt Zerbe's study of the Royal Marines in the eighteenth century.[19] Seafarers, in particular, as Richard Blake-more shows, needed to adapt their experiences of community to their lived transitional experiences and, as a result, found identity in a variety of places and at different levels. More importantly, Blake-

[17] Duncan Redford (ed.), *Maritime History and Identity: The Sea and Culture in the Modern World* (London, 2014).

[18] James Davey, 'The Naval Hero and British National Identity 1707–1750', ibid. 13–37; Duncan Redford, 'The Royal Navy, Sea Blindness and British National Identity', ibid. 61–78.

[19] Cori Convertito, 'Defying Conformity: Using Tattoos to Express Individu-ality in the Victorian Royal Navy', ibid. 205–29; Britt Zerbe, 'The Other Side of an Amphibian's Identity: British Marines on Land, 1755–1802', ibid. 163–82.

more shows that their constant movement between land and sea also to a certain extent transformed their homes into transitional spaces, most strikingly in the case of the Thames parishes below London Bridge.[20] This shows that, beyond the truisms that the coast is where land and sea meet and that there are people moving to and fro, transitional experiences on the coast also translated into distinct social settings.

Quite a different challenge to traditional narratives of national identity has recently been put forward by Jonathan Scott from the perspective of intellectual history. In a slim yet powerful volume on geography and political identities in Britain from 1500 to 1800 Scott essentially challenges the popular myth of Britain's island identity by firmly locating its emergence within the political thought of the early modern period, studying what he calls geographical language as a component of the history of political ideas. He looks at a wide range of genres, such as accounts of travel and exploration, cartography, geography, and early marine science, as well as more properly political texts about the British nation's relationship with the sea, the Continent, and naval policies.

In his sometimes excursive discussion of these texts, ranging from those by well-known writers such as Richard Hakluyt, Walter Raleigh, and Daniel Defoe to those by the less famous, Scott has two interrelated aims. The first is to find the political behind the geographical language employed by these writers, who 'frequently turn out to be talking, not about geography, but about politics, history or religion'.[21] The second, which also informs much of the subsequent narrative of the book, is to analyse not only how 'a rural, aristocratic and monarchical grain-growing society'[22] such as sixteenth-century England came to be a maritime power, but also how it came to imagine itself as an island nation to such a degree that this was seen as a 'natural fact' rather than the outcome of a long and uneven political process.[23] Skilfully, yet sometimes elusively, Scott shows that many

[20] Richard J. Blakemore, 'The Ship, the River and the Ocean Sea: Concepts of Space in the Seventeenth-Century London Maritime Community', ibid. 98–119.

[21] Jonathan Scott, *When the Waves Ruled Britannia: Geography and Political Identities, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 2011), 11.

[22] Ibid. 3.

[23] Ibid. 6.

writers were aiming 'to drive the nation into a dynamic relationship with the sea and its mobility', frequently by employing models derived from ancient Athens and Carthage, as well as by pointing to the ever-present threat and example of the Dutch.[24]

Perhaps because Scott is concerned more with ideas than specific policies, we find only passing mention of actual physical geographies. Yet it is interesting to see that many of the authors he looks at, such as William Temple, Henry Sheres, and Daniel Defoe, were directly concerned with the physical features of the adjoining areas of land and sea, whether relating to fortification, navigation, or more broadly cultural aspects. Yet this ultimately suggests that beneath the layers of imagined national identity there was also a process of revising an understanding of the importance of the coast in Britain's relationship with the sea—both its physical and cultural features—that remains unexplored in Scott's account.

This engagement with the coast as a barrier and frontier is perhaps more than just a latent feature of British society in the early modern period, as Renaud Morieux's recent biography of the English Channel suggests.[25] While Morieux shares Scott's concern to question British national (and island) identity, his challenge is launched from a different perspective. Scott attempts to dismantle the myth of the island situation as a geographical, that is, natural feature and argues instead that it was culturally and politically constructed under specific circumstances. Morieux is at first sight engaged in a similar task in seeing the Channel as a border and military frontier between England and France. In contrast to Scott's concentration on the realm of ideas, however, Morieux takes ideas merely as a starting point to go well beyond and below that level, down to micro histories on a local scale.

Working his way through geographical, legal, and political writings of the early modern period, Morieux argues that the border was anything but natural. Rather, he suggests, it was a product invented for political and ideological purposes on both sides of the Channel. Firmly rejecting narratives of Anglo-French rivalry as a starting point for understanding the Channel as a military frontier, Morieux pays attention to the Channel itself, and to the activity on its fringes, thus

[24] Ibid. 53.
[25] Renaud Morieux, *The Channel: England, France and the Construction of a Maritime Frontier in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2016).

uncovering numerous stories of fluidity, contact, and exchange at local level. Whether involving the fishermen of both countries, smugglers and privateers, or ordinary travellers attempting to cross the borders of the two realms, his explorations are largely coastal in that they analyse the comings and goings on the Channel's northern and southern shores. Morieux in fact adopts a point made earlier by Michael Pearson, namely, that 'littoral societies share characteristics which distinguish coastal areas from inland areas, in terms of economic activities, social structures, interrelations with foreign worlds, diets, environmental hazards and religious beliefs'.[26]

Morieux thus starts by assuming that coastal areas on both sides of the Channel may be much more akin to each other than they each are to their own inland counterparts. We will see below what this means in terms of coastal activity. But as far as this relates to questions of identity, what Morieux achieves is, once again, a helpful complication of the picture. Claims of identity based on geography that are formed at national level and on a grand scale utterly fail to grasp (in the methodologies of the historian) or to represent (in the rhetoric of contemporary politicians) the minute exchanges, adaptations and, as Allen, Groom, and Smith would have it, 'replottings' of identity on a local scale.

II *Littoral Imageries*

If we take the lesson for coastal history to be that we need to look more closely to assess its significance for matters such as identity, the question remains: what does this closer look produce in terms of new insights? Most research in this area has come from studies of literature and art, rather than from historiography. After her monograph on *Riverscapes and National Identities* (2010) and her edited volume on *Art and Identity at the Water's Edge* (2012), Tricia Cusack now engages with the oceans more intensively in a volume on the sea as a social space as represented in visual depictions from 1700 to the present.[27] The coast itself features far less prominently here than in her earlier

[26] Ibid. 25.
[27] Tricia Cusack, *Riverscapes and National Identities* (Syracuse, NY, 2010); ead. (ed.), *Art and Identity at the Water's Edge* (Farnham, 2012); ead. (ed.), *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present: Envisaging the Sea as Social Space* (Farnham, 2014).

volume, but because she conceives of the ocean as a liminal space, we frequently encounter the littoral as a decisive site of activity. Once again, identity figures prominently in the structure of the volume as oceans are considered to be spaces 'conducive to the modification and formation of identities'.[28]

The volume is divided into four sections, the first of which explores representations of ocean crossings and their meaning for travellers. In the second section, the ship is considered as a 'microcosm' and a liminal space in its own right, before the third section addresses narratives of shipwrecks and jetsam. In the last section, the book explores the importance of natural features of the oceans as portrayed in art and natural history. A major strength of the volume is that its contributions approach the topic from a wide variety of angles, focusing on representations in contemporary maps as well as in drawings, paintings, writings, and objects. While the coast may appear thematically marginal in this concentration on the ocean, its importance is undeniably axiomatic to many chapters. In fact, in several of the contributions the reader gains an immediate sense of the importance of the shore in trans-oceanic encounters.

In Emily Burns's chapter on Atlantic crossings as represented by writers and artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the transformative experience of travelling between the old and the new world is sharply evoked, not so much by the crossing itself as by the departure and, a genuinely coastal experience, the first sighting of land. Burns goes on to call the void between Europe and America a 'littoral space'.[29] This transformative experience is equally important to earlier forms of travel. Elizabeth C. Childs explores the longing for 'an age of first encounters' in the art of Gauguin, La Farge, and Barnfield in the nineteenth century and finds that the 'beaches of encounter', studied earlier by Greg Dening, especially attracted their attention and fascination.[30] In this view, 'the border of shore and land

[28] Ead., 'Introduction: Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present: Envisaging the Sea as Social Space', ibid. 1–20, at 8.

[29] Emily Burns, 'The Old World Anew: The Atlantic as the Liminal Site of Expectations', ibid. 27–54, at 50.

[30] Elizabeth C. Childs, 'Second Encounters in the South Seas: Revisiting the Shores of Cook and Bougainville in the Art of Gauguin, La Farge and Barnfield', ibid. 55–67, at 55; Greg Denning, 'Writing, Rewriting the Beach: An Essay', *Rethinking History*, 2 (1998), 143–72.

is thus not empty space, or the site given over to leisure, but rather may be read as the site of historic encounter between Islanders and strangers'.[31]

The significance of these encounters, going beyond the experience of the individual, can be glimpsed in Carla Lois's 'cartographical biography' of the Atlantic Ocean.[32] In this highly innovative reading of cartographical representations of geography, the very shaping of what we term the Atlantic Ocean is partly attributed to the inner logic and perspective of colonial expansion and empire-building. Here we can see that early modern geographical knowledge was heavily shaped by the fact that early imperial projects were essentially coastal in nature, a point made by John Gillis, who coined the term 'alongshore empires' to describe the phenomenon.[33] Remarkably, therefore, the coast emerges here as both defined in terms of space (whether imperial or otherwise) and undefined, intermediate, and 'messy' when itself considered as a place.

Perhaps it is the realization of this twofold importance of the colonial shore and the imperial coast for the exercise of authority and the instigation of exchange—an insight we owe to scholars of global encounters—that has helped us to think about European shores in new ways. Here, too, as other chapters in the same volume demonstrate, littoral experiences are not as homogeneous as the idea of a continuous shoreline neatly separating land and sea might suggest. At the same time, however, this neat separation of land and sea is highly instructive for cultural imageries. Unsurprisingly, this applies most of all to those operating on both sides of the tideline, as a contribution by Geoff Quilley on sailors in British visual culture in the eighteenth century demonstrates.[34] Once again, and much as in Richard Blakemore's chapter mentioned above, sailors are represented as belonging to a different social setting from their land-based contemporaries, occupying a distinct social space. This makes them, as Quilley goes on to show, an easy target for satire by drawing on a

[31] Childs, 'Second Encounters in the South Seas', 55.
[32] Carla Lois, 'From Mare Tenebrorum to Atlantic Ocean: A Cartographical Biography (1470–1990)', in Cusack (ed.), *Framing the Ocean*, 23–36.
[33] Gillis, *The Human Shore*, 83.
[34] Geoff Quilley, 'Sailors on Horseback: The Representation of Seamen and Social Space in Eighteenth-Century British Visual Culture', in Cusack (ed.), *Framing the Ocean*, 85–100.

land/sea dialectic. While the shoreline is profoundly blurred by social experiences, that fact that it is overemphasized in literary and artistic representations generates creative potential. The same mechanism, applied humorously in this case, can also be observed in more tragic narratives. Carl Thompson, for instance, explores this tension between land and sea in relation to narratives of eighteenth-century shipwrecks. He argues that their allegorical meaning exposes 'general social and political anxieties' in contemporary Britain as the wreck can be taken to represent the state of society and the state in general.[35] In this sense then, the shore, where the wreck is washed up and the sailor is shipped, is the locus and stimulus of a specific creative potential.

This potential is especially pronounced in the chapters of *Coastal Works*, edited by Allen, Groom, and Smith. Yet its essence remains surprisingly elusive. According to many of the contributors to the volume, it rests firmly on uncertainty and ambiguity. In Fiona Stafford's essay on the Solway Firth, this is explored through the literary works of men such as John Ruskin and Walter Scott, who, in their writings, were heavily impressed by the seemingly empty space of the Solway. Rather than from any strict sense of place or firmly established meanings and identities, however, this resulted from the shifting meanings attributed to and associated with this particular stretch of shore, which is, according to Stafford, 'in perpetual motion, where nothing rests safely'.[36] Throughout her essay, Stafford likens the art of writing to the physical features of the shore itself, where shapes (like narratives or, for that matter, identities) are constantly discernible and yet perpetually shifting.

A similar argument is put forward by Nicholas Allen in his discussion of contemporary Irish literature. The shore as a 'mutable and evocative' border between land and sea is of particular importance for this because it functions as a 'permeable barrier through which a series of cultural exchanges, literary, historical, political, and environmental, take place'.[37] Other chapters explore this theme for Norman

[35] Carl Thompson, 'Shipwrecks, Mutineers and Cannibals: Maritime Mythology and the Political Unconscious in Eighteenth-Century Britain', ibid. 133–48, at 134.

[36] Fiona Stafford, 'The Roar of the Solway', in Allen, Groom, and Smith (eds.), *Coastal Works*, 41–59, at 48.

[37] Nicholas Allen, 'Ireland, Literature, and the Coastal Imaginary', ibid. 61–75, at 63.

Nicholson and Cumbria (Andrew Gibson), and for Louis MacNeice (John Brannigan).[38] Most strikingly, however, this point is illustrated by Daniel Brayton's analysis of Erskine Childers's *Riddle of the Sands*. Like other authors in the volume, Brayton understands the coast as a 'transformative zone where language, culture, politics, and the imagination meet to become constitutive dimensions of a physical geography that is distinctive and difficult to define'.[39] He suggests that Childers's spy thriller, which he places in the genre of coastal navigation, incorporates this understanding of the coast in telling a tale of the relationship between the individual and the nation-state. By likening coastal navigation to a hermeneutic activity, Brayton compares the individual's exploration of the 'indeterminacy of coastlines' to the complicated exploration of national affiliations and individual identity.[40]

The extent to which the shape of identity and the course of history are liable to shifts and respond to the shapes of the shore is, finally, revealed in an unexpected yet persuasive way by Nick Groom in an essay on an eighteenth-century (satirical) proposal to drain the Irish sea.[41] This satire, playing with the counter-factual and giving it a political and cultural twist, and Grooms's subsequent explorations of this idea, perhaps most vividly illustrate the archipelagic perspective to which the authors subscribe, and which is celebrated in a separate essay by Jos Smith.[42] As far as cultural and political imageries are concerned, there is, indubitably, a coastal edge effect. And it may well be that its most basic trait is the multiplication of narratives (whether of identity or otherwise) because of the coast's distinct yet elusive nature.

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[38] Andrew Gibson, 'At the Dying Atlantic's Edge: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast', ibid. 77–90; John Brannigan, 'Felt Routes: Louis MacNeice and the North-East Atlantic Archipelago', ibid. 93–109.

[39] Daniel Brayton, 'The Riddle of the Sands: Erskine Childers between the Tides', ibid. 111–28, at 111.

[40] Ibid. 118.

[41] Nick Groom, 'Draining the Irish Sea: The Colonial Politics of Water', ibid. 21–39.

[42] Jos Smith, 'Fugitive Allegiances: The Good Ship Archipelago and the Atlantic Edge', ibid. 243–60.

III *Coastal Activities*

The question remains, however, whether this edge effect was translated into distinct coastal activities in the past. If we believe Gillis, this was certainly the case. He claims that coastal areas became more sharply differentiated from inland regions by 1500, largely because of what might be called the presence of the state on the periphery. While inland territories became thoroughly feudalized and increasingly controlled, coastal areas retained a higher degree of autonomy throughout the early modern period, in part as a result of neglect by the authorities, in part because of resistance to them. Gillis argues that coastal populations became what he calls 'Souls of the Edge', distinguished by the patterns of their economic activities, social structure, and political culture.[43] Given the current state of research, this observation is arguably more a claim than a statement backed by empirical evidence. But maritime history, especially with a local and regional outlook, can with some legitimacy claim to have worked along these lines for a fairly long time. Ultimately, therefore, the question is whether coastal history's agenda with its specific set of questions can usefully be combined with more traditional maritime histories. Is there something coastal in maritime history—economically, socially, politically—that warrants particular attention?

In terms of a distinctly coastal economy, a number of activities come to mind that can be distinguished, if only at first glance, as legal (fishing, trading, shipbuilding) or illegal (smuggling, wrecking, pirating). In the case of early modern Britain, privileged insight into all these matters can be gleaned from customs records. Just how intimate the historian's knowledge of these coastal operations can be is richly demonstrated by W. B. Stephens's recent monograph on the seventeenth-century customs service in the West Country.[44] An investigation into the customs service in the western ports from 1682 to 1684 by the gentleman and experienced customs officer William Culliford is the starting point for an analysis that is thoroughly regional, yet whose findings have much wider implications. Culliford's investigation was designed to combat fraud, embezzlement, collu-

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[43] Gillis, *The Human Shore*, 75.
[44] W. B. Stephens, *The Seventeenth-Century Customs Service Surveyed: William Culliford's Investigation of the Western Ports, 1682–84* (Abingdon, 2016).

sion, corruption, and other vices among the customs officers of the western ports. In the course of his investigation, however, Culliford naturally encountered the broader issue of smuggling in various shapes and forms. The wider significance of Stephens's analysis, therefore, is that he is able to uncover if not the exact extent, then certainly the widespread nature of clandestine trade among the coastal populations, and the central authorities' weakness in making their agents comply strictly with the Crown's interests in the localities. Perhaps the most striking feature revealed by Stephens's account is the astonishing flexibility which the system of controlling trade, both legal and clandestine, displayed along the shores of the kingdom.

If we look beyond the governmental rhetoric employed by Culliford, who was naturally concerned with the efficiency and integrity of the customs service, the weaknesses in administration that he stumbled upon can also be read as a distinctly coastal adaptation of fiscal and economic enforcement. The many forms of collusion between officers and merchants, fishermen and smugglers, and the equally numerous forms of pressure put on customs officials by informing, bribery, and blackmail suggest not only that smuggling enjoyed wide popular support among coastal populations, something that is widely recognized in the research, but perhaps also hints at something more significant.[45] Throughout Stephens's book and Culliford's report we find that within local populations social roles and economic occupations changed frequently and with astonishing ease. Although any one person could, of course, always be both merchant and smuggler, officer and merchant, the quick and seamless blending of different roles suggests something in the sense of Gérard le Bouëdec's 'pluriactivity' in these areas.[46] Regardless of whether this involved smugglers turning informers turning officers, or fishermen turning officers turning smugglers, people worked just as easily on both sides of the line between official and clandestine business as they routinely did on both sides of the tideline.

Once again, Gillis provides a term for the main features of this economic setting. By analogy with the process of proto-industrialization that took place inland during the early modern period, he calls

[45] Cal Winslow, 'Sussex Smugglers', in Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1975), 119–66.
[46] Le Bouëdec, *Activités maritimes et sociétés littorales*.

what happened along the shores the rise of a 'protomaritime econo-my'.[47] Gillis argues that this process was decentralized and based on activities that varied by season and location, with individuals and families engaging in different forms of employment on land and sea according to circumstances. Ample evidence for this is supplied by the voluminous first-ever maritime history of Cornwall, edited by Philip Payton, Alston Kennerley, and Helen Doe.[48] The book covers a deliberately wide spectrum of maritime aspects in an attempt to adopt 'inclusive definitions of maritime history' that go beyond more traditional and perhaps obvious naval and commercial themes.[49] Equipped with thorough introductions to each of the chronological-ly structured five parts of the book, the volume also contains more specialized chapters on individual maritime issues, sometimes in the form of a case study, sometimes with a more general outlook. In many of these chapters, especially those on smuggling and wrecking, coastwise and international trade, and fishing and mining, Gillis's main assumption regarding the flexibility of littoral economic activi-ties is confirmed. For coastal populations in medieval and early mod-ern Cornwall especially, seasonally and socially induced shifts of occupation between farming and fishing, pirating and privateering, trading and smuggling can easily be identified as a key characteris-tic. Even the tin miners occasionally went pirating. Doe, Kennerley, and Payton call these occupational patterns 'bi-employment',[50] while John C. Appleby attributes the attraction of piracy and privateering to 'irregular employment patterns among seafaring communities'.[51] Finally, N. A. M. Rodger observes in a chapter on Cornwall's rela-tions with the Royal Navy that 'those who went to sea were very often part-timers; typically farmers and fishermen, or miners and fishermen, according to season and opportunity'.[52] Because the book covers Cornwall from the earliest times to the twenty-first century,

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[47] Gillis, *The Human Shore*, 76.

[48] Philip Payton, Alston Kennerley, and Helen Doe (eds.), *The Maritime History of Cornwall* (Exeter, 2014).

[49] Eid, 'Introduction and Acknowledgements', ibid. 1–5, at 3.

[50] Doe, Kennerley, and Payton, 'Introduction' [to part II], ibid. 75–96, at 87.

[51] John C. Appleby, 'Plunder and Prize: Cornish Piracy and Privateering dur-ing the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', ibid. 97–105, at 97.

[52] N. A. M. Rodger, 'Cornwall and the Royal Navy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', ibid. 171–81, at 171.

the introductions can also trace long-term trends. Apart from a general economic decline after an age of prosperity and truly international trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it also emerges that occupations, like the economy itself, became more specialized during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, for the medieval and early modern periods at least, coastal livelihoods in Cornwall, and presumably also elsewhere along Britain's shores, seem to have been gained in ways that routinely bridged the tideline.

The editors' decision to apply a wide definition of maritime history — one that considers a maritime dimension in 'almost every facet of human knowledge' — means that this *Maritime History of Cornwall* also covers more properly land-based activities and social aspects.[53] Leaving aside the view that any attempt to separate economic and social aspects of life is futile in any event, this decision is particularly commendable as it is not typically applied in other volumes on maritime history. Quite a number of specifically coastal economic activities, such as smuggling or wrecking, cannot, as this and other volumes demonstrate, be understood in strictly economic terms.[54] While there is a clear bias towards economic interpretations throughout the volume, many chapters, and especially the carefully balanced introductions, relate these activities to the social situation of Cornish people. While coastal settlements, for instance, are categorized primarily along economic lines into different types of coastal communities in at least two cases in the volume, there is also a clear understanding of the social factors driving economic change and the resulting social dynamics in these communities.[55]

The volume is especially strong in this regard. Whether this relates to the networks of the merchant communities and their social cohesion in port towns, or to the poorer sections of society resorting to farming, fishing, and unlawful activities in the havens and hamlets

[53] Payton, Kennerley, and Doe, 'Epilogue', ibid. 421–2, at 421.
[54] John G. Rule, 'Wrecking and Coastal Plunder', in Hay, Linebaugh, Rule, Thompson, and Winslow (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree*, 167–88; Cathryn Pearce, *Cornish Wrecking 1700–1860: Reality and Popular Myth* (Woodbridge, 2010).
[55] Maryanne Kowaleski, 'Coastal Communities in Medieval Cornwall', in Payton, Kennerley, and Doe (eds.), *The Maritime History of Cornwall*, 43–59, at 44; Doe, Kennerley, and Payton, 'Introduction' (to part IV), ibid. 233–62, at 241.

along the shore, the volume addresses these problems as much as waves of emigration in the nineteenth century, upper-class leisure pursuits, and the state and fate of the native Cornish language. This social and cultural background to economic activities is not only important as a topic in its own right, but also provides a neat link with the question of Cornish identity and other political aspects of coastal communities. After all, the question of whether coastal people really are an 'edge species' or 'Souls of the Edge' can hardly be answered by looking at economic patterns and social structures alone.

A lesson that can be drawn from Stephens's book on the customs service in western England is that the Crown's political grasp on counties such as Cornwall was not particularly strong. This is not very surprising as Cornwall is the prime example of a region that preserved a distinct regional identity well beyond the early modern period.[56] Despite the rapid decline of the Cornish language, Cornwall's reputation for lawlessness and unruliness gained from episodes such as the eighteenth-century food riots or the Newlyn Riots at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It had, in any case, already been firmly established by the earlier risings of 1497 and 1549, and Cornwall's Royalist yet separatist role during the Civil War.[57] To this can be added the county's notoriously independent stance on royal and parliamentary legislation concerning coastal issues such as wrecking and pirating. This resulted in a sizeable body of representations in Victorian literature vividly romanticizing these issues, as Simon Trezise shows.[58] Cornwall emerges as a region that was, in many respects, at the forefront of developments in international trade and industrialization, especially in the eighteenth century, while still displaying a lack of law and order in the eyes of Whitehall officials and the general public. Much of this can, perhaps convincingly, be attributed to Cornwall's geographical remoteness and to the fact that, according to the editors of this volume, it was 'quintessentially a maritime region'.[59] Yet Cornwall is perhaps too exceptional to permit

[56] Mark Stoyle, *West Britons: Cornish Identities and the Early Modern British State* (Exeter, 2002).

[57] Doe, Kennerley, and Payton, 'Introduction' [to part II], *passim*.

[58] Simon Trezise, 'The Smuggler and the Wrecker: Literary Representations of Cornish Maritime Life', ibid. 318–28.

[59] Payton, Kennerley, and Doe, 'Introduction and Acknowledgements', ibid. 1–5, at 1.

generalizations on whether there was a distinctly coastal problem with law and order.

Leaving the case of Cornwall aside, therefore, and coming back to a book discussed earlier, we can also look at how these social and economic underpinnings of coastal life contributed to a genuine political culture. Here, the monograph by Renaud Morieux on the Channel in the eighteenth century, despite following its own agenda, provides an interesting starting point. As mentioned above, Morieux chooses to approach the coast as a border region not from the perspective of central authorities and on a national scale, but focuses instead on more regional and local stories. This first becomes visible in his analysis of the Channel coasts as military frontier regions. Rather than imposing his own understanding, he looks at how contemporaries envisioned this border. Crucially, it was not quite the same in England and France. In the French case, the littoral was understood to be the border and was therefore heavily fortified, but in England this notion developed late. It was not until the Napoleonic era, for example, that the coast began to be more heavily fortified, while an understanding that naval defence was properly conducted at sea prevailed for most of the eighteenth century. These different notions of the maritime border, Morieux goes on to show, developed out of different legal concepts regarding sovereignty at sea.

With greater relevance to coastal politics, however, Morieux also analyses the local agents of border defence in both countries. This analysis of the *garde-côte* (in France) and the militia (in England) serves the wider purpose of allowing the coastal populations' loyalties to their local areas versus the nation to be assessed. Tellingly, the results are not straightforward. While a 'growing sense of nationhood' can be detected among local populations,[60] Morieux's analysis also shows a considerable amount of reluctance and even resistance on the part of English coastal counties to be enlisted for a purpose beyond the locality. Morieux's book is full of such stories and gains much of its narrative tension and explanatory potential from relating local attitudes to national agendas, which he also traces in a number of other issues. Whether this involves the harvesting of seaweed by coastal populations, fishery rights as defined by international (customs) borders, or the activities of smugglers and privateers, the vol-

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[60] Morieux, *The Channel*, 139.

ume illustrates that populations were not only subjected to legal norms and treaties, devised by central authorities, that contributed to a territorialization of the border in a national sense, but also developed and followed their own agendas on the ground. These were sometimes openly contrary to those of the centre and, at times, appropriated the rhetoric of the central authorities to further their own goals.

The book thus demonstrates that fishermen were able to influence the government authorities in their own interests, most notably in the negotiation of fishing truces that often ran counter to the factions of international warfare. At the same time, smugglers were able to continue plying their trade throughout periods of war across the Channel by adapting to the proto-nationalist game of identities that the authorities created and played. According to Morieux, all of this resulted in categories of (national) identity on the coast and at sea acquiring a degree of 'fuzziness'.[61]

In all these cases, national identities remained elusive and flexible at local level and did not easily conform to ideas expressed by the central government authorities. In fact, Morieux's book vividly demonstrates that local interests, mostly economic in nature, usually retained the upper hand among local populations. As a result, innumerable schemes for eluding the grasp of the central authorities were developed. Going beyond the more specialized question of whether this independence could successfully be used by local populations 'from below' in adapting to a distinctly coastal border situation, the sheer quantity of specifically coastal regulations imposed on these regions also suggests a politically distinctive space. Whether we observe coastal populations pursuing their own socio-economic agenda (successfully or not), or national governments attempting to enforce specific coastal policies, therefore, it is clear that these influences to a certain extent contributed to a politically distinct situation.

This is evident both in the surveillance mechanisms and institutions of border control created at the time of the French Revolution, and in the forms of jurisdiction and legislation to which coastal regions were constantly subjected. Regardless of whether this related to the Admiralty's jurisdiction over wrecking and privateering, or to customs legislation regarding the legal confines of ports and the hovering limits of ships at sea, in the eyes both of local communities and Whitehall officials, the coast was a distinct region that required dis-

[61] Ibid. 194.

tinct political approaches. These characteristics make coasts and maritime frontiers, according to Morieux, 'territories worth studying in themselves'.[62]

This book's breadth and thematic range, however, also demonstrate that this sort of argument requires an inclusive approach. Even if there are distinctly coastal economic activities, social settings, and political circumstances, the significance of the coast as a space does not become plain in any single one of these aspects. As the politically informed socio-economic situation of fishermen and smugglers, merchants, and privateers suggests, an understanding of the coast must strive to combine economic, social, cultural, and political aspects. It is apparently only in the ways in which these are intertwined that we can with any confidence discern a coastal edge effect and speak of coastal communities as unique.

IV *Cultures of the Edge?*

What follows from all of this for the notion of 'coastal history'? As in every historiographical enterprise that considers itself 'new', we must, of course, be careful not to overstate the case. Maritime research has a long tradition and there is abundant work on themes and topics that certainly can but do not necessarily have to be considered 'coastal'. Yet there seems to be something behind this notion. The shore, as much of the research discussed here shows, is a liminal place, a contact zone open to meetings and relations of every sort, violent and otherwise. To characterize the shore as an ecotone — a concept borrowed from ecology — that is, as a zone of transition between different, overlapping ecosystems producing increased diversity, is therefore certainly an apt metaphor for social life in historical communities at the water's edge.[63] The shore is a distinct space, for it produces distinct edge effects. Because it can be imagined as an edge, it triggers the imagination both artistically and politically at individual, regional, and national levels. Because it can be demarcated as an edge, it produces closures and confrontations, but also engenders new and creative exchanges. And because it imposes

[62] Ibid. 22.
[63] John Gillis, 'Afterword: Beyond the Blue Horizon', in Allen, Groom, and Smith (eds.), *Coastal Works*, 261–68, at 262.

itself as an edge materially, it demands adjustments, variations, and adaptability in economic, social, and political terms.

The volumes discussed in this article make a strong case for paying attention to something that manifests itself historically in such distinct and remarkable ways. What the research discussed here also shows, however, is that as a location, an area, or a line on a map, the coast is a cultural construct, whose shape and value changes over time. What the coast is, where the coast is, and what the coast does, is open to interpretation both then and now. In other words, rather than a historiographical subject in its own right, the coast is perhaps more a perspective that emerges when one chooses to look for it. To what extent adopting this perspective is a historiographically fruitful enterprise is, as always, a different question.

Perhaps the most important factor in applying a new perspective to historical sources is whether it reveals things previously unknown. Does it produce questions with sufficient analytical drive to reach beyond its immediate thematic range? To date it seems that coastal history is more occupied with establishing the existence of its subject than considering ways in which it can usefully relate to more established research fields, narratives, and angles such as naval or maritime, social, or political history. Much will depend, therefore, on the questions that this coastal perspective can ultimately generate. As for the British case, for instance, the question is whether the concept of coastal history has anything to offer for established narratives of national and imperial, colonial and maritime history. As has become apparent in some of the strands of research discussed above, this seems to apply to issues of cultural identity on an individual and a national scale, and to the patterns in the social life of local and regional communities at the water's edge. In both cases, the coastal perspective may well be able to contribute to research problems in relation to empire- and nation-building, and state-formation and social change. For the moment, however, we need more empirical research on the British case. As examples from France, India, and the Americas show, this is certainly feasible.[64] It has already become apparent that this coastal perspective, in the case of Britain at least, may be par-

[64] The following is by no means an exhaustive list: Le Bouëdec, *Activités maritimes et sociétés littorales*; Frédérique Laget, Philippe Josserand, and Brice Rabot (eds.), *Entre horizons terrestres et marins: Sociétés, campagnes et littoraux de l'Ouest atlantique* (Rennes, 2017); Christophe Cérino, Aliette Geistdoerfer,

ticularly relevant to questions of national identity, especially as it relates to Britain's maritime, island, and archipelagic situation. At least to date, however, what new interpretations this perspective may ultimately produce and what new insights can be gleaned from it are still moot points.

Gérard Le Bouëdec, and François Ploux (eds.), *Entre terre et mer: Sociétés littorales et pluriactivités (XVe–XXe siècle)* (Rennes, 2004); Yogesh Sharma (ed.), *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Premodern India* (Delhi, 2010); Andrew Lipman, *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast* (New Haven, 2015); Christopher L. Pastore, *Between Land and Sea: The Atlantic Coast and the Transformation of New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014); for current research on the Scottish case see Worthington (ed.), *The New Coastal History*; id., 'Ferries in the Firthlands: Communications, Society and Culture along a Northern Scottish Rural Coast, *c*.1600 to *c*.1809', *Rural History*, 27 (2016), 129–48.

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